GEOGRAFISKA ANNALER SERIES B HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography

ISSN: 0435-3684 (Print) 1468-0467 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rgab20

Resurgent nationalisms & populist politics in the neoliberal age

Gillian Hart

To cite this article: Gillian Hart (2020) Resurgent nationalisms & populist politics in the neoliberal age, Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 102:3, 233-238, DOI: 10.1080/04353684.2020.1780792

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2020.1780792

Published online: 08 Jul 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 3021

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rgab20

GEOGRAFISKA ANNALER: SERIES B, HUMAN GEOGRAPHY
2020, VOL. 102, NO. 3, 233–238
https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2020.1780792

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION

Check for updates

Resurgent nationalisms & populist politics in the neoliberal age

Gillian Hart [a,b]

[a]Humanities Graduate Centre, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa; [b]Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay introduces the Special Issue of *Geografiska Annaler, Series B*, which brings together contributions to the Vega Symposium on *Resurgent Nationalisms and Populist Politics in the Neoliberal Age*, held at the Swedish Academy of Sciences, Stockholm, on 24 April 2018. In addition to a revised and extended version of my keynote lecture ('Why Did It Take So Long? Trump-Bannonism in a Global Conjunctural Frame'), the Special Issue includes articles by Manu Goswami ('The Political Economy of the Nation Form'), Tova Höjdestrand ('Fatherland, Faith and Family Values: Anti-Liberalism and the Desire for Difference among Russian Grassroots Conservatives') and Kanishka Goonewardena ('Populism, Nationalism and Marxism in Sri Lanka: From Anti-colonial Struggle to Authoritarian Neoliberalism') based on their contributions to the Symposium.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 June 2020
Accepted 7 June 2020

KEYWORDS
Right-wing nationalism; left populism; relational comparison; India; South Africa; United States; Russia; Sri Lanka

The end of the Cold War was supposed to usher in the global triumph of neoliberal capitalism combined with secular liberal democracy. Since the early 1990s, increasingly financialized capitalism has continued to metastasize around the globe – but we have also witnessed the explosive growth of racist and xenophobic expressions of nationalism and authoritarian right-wing populist politics in many different regions of the world, often linked to the rise of religious fundamentalisms and invocations of 'family values'. How best are we to comprehend these forces in relation to one another and to other processes, and how might such understandings contribute to possibilities for social change?

My invitation from the Swedish Society of Anthropology and Geography to convene the Vega Symposium in 2018 offered a wonderful opportunity to bring together a small group of scholars working on these crucially important questions in distinctive though related ways in different places, with a shared sense of political urgency. In this Introduction to the Special Issue of *Geografiska Annaler* I hope to show how, for all their differences, the four essays operate in mutually illuminating ways, and speak to some of the profound challenges of the present conjuncture as well as pressing political debates.

Confronting questions of comparison in a global frame

In addition to conjuring up spectres of fascism, the rise of the right in many regions of the world today is generating powerful imperatives for comparison. More often than not, these comparisons assert what Manu Goswami (this volume) calls a straight chain of equivalence from Trump to Putin to Modi to Orbán to Bolsonaro – and a host of other 'brothers from another mother' as the South African comedian Trevor Noah put it.[1] Such comparisons also take for granted pre-given national frameworks when these very frameworks are part of the problem. Often as well they are cast in terms of ideal-types that attach adjectives to 'populism' and then list the proximity of different

CONTACT Gillian Hart hart@berkeley.edu University of California Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, 94720 United States
© 2020 Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography

cases. Even when not explicitly comparative, many analyses deploy an argument that treats neoliberalism as cause and right-wing nationalism/populism as effect.

The essays in this special issue address the relationship of right-wing nationalisms and populist politics to neoliberal capitalism and modalities of rule in diverse national settings – India, South Africa, the U.S., Sri Lanka and Russia. Together the four essays constitute an inherently comparative set of conversations, but their relations with one another differ profoundly from conventional comparative approaches. By far the most common positivist form of comparison takes pre-given national 'cases' as separate and independent of one another – as exemplified in tendencies to assert 'chains of equivalence' linking different authoritarian figures in the world today. An alternative approach (often erroneously coded as 'Marxist') asserts a general or encompassing global process such as 'neoliberalization' or 'globalization', and then identifies specific national cases as variants of that process. In contrast to both, my essay in this Special Issue suggests a method for bringing the key forces at play in different national settings into the same frame of analysis by seeing them neither as pre-given cases nor as variants of a pre-given encompassing process, but rather as connected yet spatio-historically specific nodes in globally interconnected historical geographies – and as sites in the production of world-wide processes, not just recipients of them. This method combines my earlier work on relational comparison with Antonio Gramsci's method of conjunctural analysis as a way of bringing resurgent nationalisms and populist politics in South Africa, India and the U.S. into the same global conjunctural frame.

Distinctively different from one another, the analyses by Goswami (India), Höjdestrand (Russia) and Goonewardena (Sri Lanka) are neither 'cases' nor 'variants'. Each exemplifies a body of work that has been powerfully formative in my own thinking, along with a set of broad analytical and political commitments that we all share. Instead of ideal-types or models of cause and effect, we all work with relational forms of understanding focused on the multiple, contradictory practices and processes that connect the rise of the right with the diffusion of neoliberalism as a global form. This analytical focus connects as well with a shared political commitment to immanent critique. Rather than just rejecting or dismissing the rise of the right, we are all committed to deeper understandings of its inner workings, tensions and dynamics in different parts of the world. All four essays show that it is impossible to grasp these connections and processes by focusing simply or primarily on the recent past (2008 and/or 2015), and on strictly national frames of analysis. In different ways we all locate contemporary manifestations of right-wing nationalisms and populist politics in post-World War II transformations. These transformations, in turn, are the partial product of much longer interconnected historical geographies of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and revolution, with relations and understandings that remain active, constitutive and consequential forces in the present – especially as they pertain to race, caste, gender, sexuality, religion and nationalisms, in relation to one another and to class processes.

Taken together, these analyses underscore the depth and extent of political challenges posed by the rise of the right as well as the limits of easy solutions – while also suggesting the political stakes of deeper understandings of tensions and contradictions, along with relations and connections. Let me turn now to outline of each of the articles and their mutual illuminations; point to some productive resonances with related bodies of work; and suggest how, collectively, they speak to contemporary political debates.

Outlines/mutual illuminations/productive resonances

My essay 'Why Did It Take So Long? Trump-Bannonism in a Global Conjunctural Frame' was provoked initially by debates that erupted immediately following Trump's election in November 2016. From the perspective of my work on the coincidence of neoliberalism, intensified nationalisms and populist politics in both South Africa and India since the end of the Cold War, I was struck by the parochial presumptions of American exceptionalism, and by how much of the debate on both the liberal right and the left was cast in terms of race versus class (or 'culture' versus 'economics'),

effectively reinventing a much older debate in South Africa. I was driven as well by the imperative not just for comparative understandings, but for situating Trumpism (or, as I will argue, Trump-Bannonism) in relation to forces at play in South Africa and India in the same global conjunctural frame. This frame enables us to see the ascent to state power of an extreme form of right-wing nationalism and populist politics in the U.S. neither as an aberration nor as pre-ordained, but as an ongoing though latent possibility that required a particular conjuncture of forces to burst forth; and that also sheds light on the specific ways that Trump-Bannonism is riddled with contradictions.

The scaffolding is provided by a set of key global conjunctural moments, which I define as major turning points when interconnected forces at multiple levels and spatial scales in different regions of the world have come together to create new conditions with worldwide implications and reverberations – bearing in mind an understanding of conjuncture not just as a period of time, but an accumulation of contradictions. Focusing on the conjuncture of the late 1940s, I develop the idea of Cold War Era (CWE) projects of accumulation and hegemony, with the latter understood not as consent but as a contested process. This move allows me to bring the South Africa (Apartheid), India (Nehruvian Development) and the U.S. (Fordism) into the same frame, while recognizing the longer histories of colonialism and imperialism that shaped these projects and processes. In a nutshell, I argue (a) that the specific ways in which these CWE projects fell apart starting in the late 1960s are crucial to understanding the timing and forms of exclusionary nationalisms and populist politics in the post-Cold War era in relation to the neoliberal counter-revolution; and (b) that these processes need to be situated in the context of changing forms of U.S. imperialism since the 1980s, through which the connections of the U.S. to different regions of the non-Western world have been redefined. I also outline the two distinctive but related forms of neoliberal hegemony (liberal and populist) that enable us to grasp the authoritarian tendencies built into neoliberal forms of capitalism, and how they operate in relation to one another in a way that amplifies tensions and fans the flames of exclusionary right-wing nationalisms.

Ever since I recognized the importance of a deeper understanding of nationalism in South Africa, Manu Goswami's work has had a powerful and direct influence on my own thinking regarding the relations between imperialism and nationalism. In addition, her insights into the history of right-wing Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) were part of what drew me to focus on questions of nationalism and neoliberalism in India and South Africa in relation to one another. Her contribution to this special issue draws on her current work on internationalist projects in the first part of the twentieth century, as well as on empire and economics. In 'The Political Economy of the Nation Form' Goswami engages directly with questions of comparison and nation formation. Pointing to her work on a key debate in the Comintern in the 1920s, when a relational form of comparison contributed to the 'hard political work of forging alliances and pushing things together', she insists that relational comparison be seen as a political as much as an analytical project. She highlights as well the need to explain the consolidation of the nation state as the dominant political form in the conjuncture of the late 1940s. Far from the nation state having the status of a pre-ordained natural unit, intense debates were underway in the inter-war years about 'what the collective frame beyond empire would look like'. Drawing on her work on India, she argues that the systemic crisis of capitalism in the 1930s consolidated the nation form, and that the crisis of the 1970s was another key moment for understanding the political economy of the nation form. Goswami also points to the formation of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the 1970s that brought together demands for greater justice in global political economy in the 1970s from a group of 'third world' states. The orchestrated political defeat of the NIEO was, she maintains, a key condition of possibility for the making of neoliberalism as a global form – an argument that meshes in interesting ways with related work along these lines that I mention in my essay. This argument emphasizes thinking about neoliberalism in terms not only of capitalist crisis but also as counter-revolution at the global level as well as in different national formations. More broadly, Goswami's call for a deeper understanding of the emergence of neoliberalism from the political economy of decolonization underscores the limits of narratives focused on the U.S. and Europe, as well as the global provenance of the rise of the right.

In her finely grained ethnographic contribution, Tova Höjdestrand focuses on relations between neoliberal counter-revolution and the rise of the right in the realms of everyday life: struggles by an ultranationalist Russian grassroots movement for 'fatherland, faith, and family values' and against 'liberalism' – although understandings of the liberalism to which they are so ferociously opposed have shifted significantly from the chaotic years of post-Soviet neoliberal 'shock therapy' to technocratic 'roll-out' forms of neoliberal governance under Putin. These changing articulations of 'the people' versus 'liberal elites' are not only a matter of austerity politics and social insecurity, she argues; they must be understood also with reference to how the consolidation of neoliberal forms of rule has provoked and intensified 'people's everyday anxieties and anticipations', with 'liberalism' coming to be seen as 'a threat not only to the Nation, but to the cornerstones of social life as such, the essence of human existence'. Höjdestrand paints a vivid picture of anxieties around cultural and ethnic preservation in the face of an ideological Western invasion – an interesting inversion of the racialized immigrant 'other' that fuels white Christian nationalism in the U.S., despite their shared aversion to the likes of Planned Parenthood. She underlines in this context the powerful nostalgia for the 1950s and 1960s 'when – as they remember it – the state indeed did not meddle in people's private lives but focused on building a prosperous society.' The desire for order and negotiation of boundaries is so intense among Russian conservatives because Russia has experienced such extreme instability, always on 'the brink of either dissolution or despotism.' Ironically, she suggests, Euro-America is now heading in a similar direction: 'The political technologists of the 1990s believed that liberalism would turn the East into the West, but as it turns out, "we" are becoming "them" instead.'

While focused on a specific grassroots movement in Russia since the end of the Cold War, Höjdestrand's essay helps to accentuate the centrality of the patriarchal or gendered nexus of family-nation-sexuality-religiosity as a key driving force in the rise of the right around the globe today. The simultaneous importance and paucity of work along these lines cries out for ethnographically-grounded critical comparative understandings. These considerations also connect with Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, and Gramsci's related conception of 'common sense' (*senso comune*). Kanishka Goonewardena and Stefan Kipfer have collaboratively and individually elaborated on the relationship of these concepts to one another and to broader processes in ways that have been foundational to my effort to construct a global conjunctural framework.

Goonewardena introduces his contribution to this Special Issue with two key events in Sri Lanka in 2018: (1) Islamophobic violence perpetrated by gangs linked to Sinhala Buddhist nationalist forces, pitted against both 'western' ideologies and agendas and Muslim 'others'; and (2) an attempted constitutional coup that nationalist forces launched against a liberal cosmopolitan ruling bloc with close ties to Euro-America – a move that highlighted 'the inability of liberal democracy to address the manifest contradictions of neoliberal development, which find expression in nationalist-populist forms in the absence of effective left alternatives.' The broad popular appeal of this Nationalist Ideology (*Jathika Chinthanaya*) stands in sharp contrast to the leading role that Marxist political parties played in the anti-colonial struggle, and to some extent in promoting the interests of peasants and workers in the post-colonial era. Goonewardena traces the defeat of the radical left in Sri Lanka most immediately to the neoliberal counter-revolution in 1977, when newly elected conservative forces replaced a Westminster-style constitution with the concentration of executive power in the office of the president; introduced neoliberal economic policies; and set about 'squashing left opposition by any means necessary.' These moves were followed by violent explosions of ethnic conflict and virulent nationalisms all over the island. Yet, he insists, the question remains of 'how did the Marxist left, which once appealed powerfully to the masses and struck fear in the ruling classes, end up so soon in the dustbin of political history?' Goonewardena challenges the prevalent view that 'Marxism failed in Sri Lanka because it could not root itself in native soil, which had been rhizomatically occupied by Buddhism.' Instead, in concert with historian Kumari Jayawardena, he points inter alia to the parliamentary compromises and alliances with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces following independence in 1948 that eroded the capacity of the left to 'fight consistently and energetically against the discriminations that the minority communities experience in their daily lives' as a belated self-

critique by the Communist Party put it. In short: 'the error of the "old left" consisted not in inadequate nationalism, but too much of it.'

In addition to echoing key themes that cut across the essays, Goonewardena's essay forms a sustained critique of widespread contemporary calls for populist politics from the left – or what Goswami calls the political arithmetic of electoral politics, when what is needed is an algebra for the people capable of restoring broken parts, as she eloquently puts it. As I have argued elsewhere, rather than a great man (or woman) capable of stringing together 'chains of equivalence' of diverse demands and grievances, the major challenges confronting subaltern groups and classes concern the organizational practices and processes through which more critical, coherent, and collective understandings and practices can take shape in the arenas of everyday life – what Gramsci called a philosophy of praxis recognizing, as he put it, that '"everyone" is a philosopher, and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity'(1971, 332–333). Goonewardena reminds us of Frantz Fanon's resonant political commitments, and his recognition that in the postcolony such a process must work through what he called 'national consciousness' in order to dismantle the divisions of colonial rule – but must also reach beyond national boundaries to an internationalist socialism.

There are also powerful resonances here with struggles against both racial capitalism and the racialized limits of nationalist narratives in the U.S. As Nikhil Pal Singh so movingly observed,

> From an immanent critique of American claims to universality, and the implicit and explicit forms of racism it has routinely upheld, black activists and intellectuals have cast their understanding of justice in terms of the global reach of the color-line … From the vision of a people's century during World War II to the revolutionary intercommunalism of the sixties, the one consistency of the black political imagination across its ideological and generational divides has been its combination of grassroots insurgency with global dreams. Perhaps it will only be by again inventing forms of politics, solidarity, identification linking the local and global scales of human oppression that we will be able to address the increasingly obvious inadequacies of the modern nation-state as a vehicle of democratic transformation and egalitarian distribution for the world's peoples. (2004, 219–220)

Taken together, the essays in this Special Issue constitute an effort to shed light on the far from inevitable forces that have fed into the fragmentations of the present, with an eye to the possibility that these understandings might contribute to efforts to construct different futures. As I draw this Introduction to a close in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis – a global conjunctural moment if ever there was one, in which the dysfunctions and brutalities of the capitalist world (dis)order grounded in the nation-state form have been so starkly exposed – the imperative for forging connections across local and global scales and registers of difference has never been greater.

Note

1. In the Daily Show on 16 November 2016, Noah suggested how Jacob Zuma's South Africa could help prepare the U.S. for Trumpism https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tKOV0KqPlg.

Acknowledgements

My deep appreciation to the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography for awarding me the Vega Medal in Human Geography; to Brett Christophers and Don Mitchell for their role in the nomination; to Kanishka Goonewardena, Manu Goswami and Tova Höjdestrand for their participation in the Vega Symposium; to Brita Hermelin and Richard Ek for their support and patience in making possible this Special Issue of *Geografiska Annaler*; to Stefan Kipfer for his careful and constructive critical reading of the papers both individually, and in relation to one another; and to Maya Kandell for superb research assistance. In the course of the project I have accumulated huge debts of gratitude to many other friends and colleagues. They include Michael Bray, Roshan Cader, Jordan Camp, Jennifer Casolo, Sharad Chari, Mike Ekers, Jennifer Greenburg, Mark Hunter, Karin Kapadia, Bridget Kenny, Jean Lave, Zach Levenson, Jacob Liming, Alex Loftus, Donald Moore, Raka Ray, Dylan Riley, Larry Rosenthal, Dale Tomich, Ahmed Veriava and Michael Watts. The usual disclaimers apply to them but not to David Szanton who has, as always, been on the front line.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Gillian Hart http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3062-1321

References

Gramsci, A. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
Singh, N. P. 2004. *Black is a Country*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.